
Language and Social Media: Challenges for Research and Teaching Linguistics

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Abstract

Social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Gmail and Flickr, are increasingly becoming the preferred tools of communication. Through social media, users are able to create content, share information, access news, interact and connect with others in an efficient manner. The kind of language used in social media interactions is a reminder that knowledge is dynamic. More researchers are demonstrating interest on the role of social media in social development within the contemporary society. The main area of concern is the impact of user-generated content (UGC) on formal use of language. The impact of social media communications on the methods and models of teaching linguistics is another area of scientific concern. The current research seeks to explore the use of language in social media communications and its impact on research methods in linguistics. In addition, the research indicates the implication of social media communication for the practice of teaching linguistics.

Language and Social Media: Challenges for Research and Teaching Linguistics

Research on the impact of social media on linguistics is generally limited. For instance, there are notable gaps in literature on the most effective methods for analyzing social media communications and UGC. Therefore, there is need for the development of new socio-anthropological models for creating empirical

literature on the impact of social media communications on the discipline of teaching linguistics (Gee, 2015). More importantly, educators in linguistics need empirical evidence to guide their practice in the contemporary society that is driven by changes in technology and increasing use of social media platforms as the preferred communication tools (Gouws, Metzler, Cai, & Hovy, 2011). Educators in linguistics need to apply innovative teaching strategies to adapt to the changing language and application of technology-driven communication tools. Social media is preferred because it enables users to communicate using a wide range of multimedia, including text, graphics, animation, images, and videos (Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, Gamon, & Dumais, 2011). In addition, users have access to a wide range of social media platforms that meet their unique needs for communication.

Young people represent the most active generation in the context of using social media. They create internet slang and other forms of UGC that have significant impact on linguistics. Nonetheless, interpretations of linguistic structures used in social media are divergent. Gouws et al. (2011) state that technically wrong spelling and use of incorrect grammar in social media communication is detrimental. On the other hand, Gee (2015) argues that UGC represents the inevitable evolution of language that complements conventional forms of communication. Billions of users on social media platforms are exposed to new language structures that are based on UGC. The emergence of portable computing or mobile devices, such as smartphones and tablets has necessitated the increasing use of social media and the evolution of language. Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil et al. (2011) demonstrate that people's choice of words is mainly influenced by the content and forms of communication they are exposed to across social media networks.

Users of social media networks seek to make what they share concise and clear. For example, users of Twitter seek to share important information within 140 characters. For this reason, they have to introduce a new form of language that is more concise when compared to the conventional language. Additionally, the 1.09 billion users of Facebook often apply alternative forms of communication, such as images, abbreviations and symbols to express their emotions rather than the traditional textual formats due to the availability of a wide range of communication tools on the platform. Therefore, communication

has become increasingly informal. The traditional forms of communication are being overtaken by the emerging language. Gouws et al. (2011) reveal that the impact of the emerging forms of communication across social media needs to be investigated in the context of their implications in both research and practice in the discipline of linguistics.

Social Media and the Evolving Language

Gee (2015) demonstrates that the language students, parents, and teachers use is influenced by exchanges across social media platforms. Qualitative research findings indicate that the standards of language are declining due to the increasing use of social media in communication processes at home, at work, or in school. Researchers focus on studying social media and communication in the context of both benefits and challenges. Therefore, approaches to research on social media and the evolving language are influenced by benefits and pitfalls of social media networking in the process of learning and using language (Gouws et al., 2011). Since social media is an apparent force behind the evolution of language, it is necessary to assess how it impacts learning and communication.

It is argued that social media causes more harm to language than benefits. Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil et al. (2011) indicate that learning competencies have declined due to the use of informal language structures. In addition, the research abilities of college students have declined due to preference to social media over research literature in books and journals. Regardless of the fact that data and information on social media are generally unreliable, students use it frequently as the preferred source of knowledge. It is the use of opinionated information presented on social media that makes it a challenge for students to conduct valid research. Demand for formal language has also declined due to the increasing preference of social media communications. It is argued that the highly user-friendly Web 2.0 technologies limit the commitment of users to correct language commands and structures (Gee, 2015). For example, autocorrect features of emerging technologies are reported to decrease the innovativeness of users and their command of language.

Anthropological Linguistics

Anthropological linguistics refers to a method of studying relationships among culture, language, and cognition. It is relevant to the current research because social media influences the manner in which thinking processes, language, and cultural values interact (Sharifian, 2013). Anthropological linguistics also provides a framework for understanding differences in cultural beliefs and their impact on the development and use of language. Ardener (2013) argues that cultural values of communities are best understood through the study of language. Behavioral patterns of members of a community are also effectively interpreted through an understanding of language.

Relationship between Culture and Language

Cultural anthropology is an important discipline that allows researchers to understand various components of culture, including morals, norms, values, knowledge, laws, beliefs, habits and customs. The experiences of individuals in the practice of their culture are effectively understood through scientific inquiry into cultural anthropology (Sharifian, 2013). The culture of social media communities and its relationship with the language of the users is best understood through anthropological linguistics. The acculturation of social media users' networks is also an integral part of research in anthropological linguistics. According to Ardener (2013), users of language should understand how culture and language interact to influence communication behaviors. Tutors and learners in linguistics should also appreciate relationships between culture and language so as they can have a realistic view of how cultural change influence linguistic styles and structures.

Relationship between Culture and Social Media Communications

Sharifian (2013) demonstrates that change in culture is directly related to the use of social media in communication. Notably, members of communities across the world are assuming a globalized culture due to the sharing of common communication norms and styles on social media platforms. Gee (2015) elucidates that the culture of the society and that of organizations are influenced by social

media communications. For example, professionals within an organization use social media to propagate shared values, goals and objectives with a view of promoting the interests of their organization. The culture of collaboration and teamwork within organizations is specifically influenced by the extent to which employee use social media tools in professional communication processes (Ardener, 2013). Information resources are effectively shared within organizations due to the increasing adoption and use of social media tools by professionals.

Gee (2015) reveals that relationships between societal culture and social media communications are complex. Researchers face notable challenges in understanding cognitive processes of social media users from different cultures. In addition, there are gaps in empirical literature on how culture and cognitive processes influence the use of language in social media communications. Ardener (2013) recommends that adequate knowledge on the culture of social media users is required for the determination of the processes in which it influences their cognition and communication processes. Evidently, people from different cultures view the world in divergent ways. However, the commonalities in behavior, values and communication that are created due to the use of social media contribute to the development of a common worldview by social media users.

Multimodality

Multimodality refers to a theoretical framework on how people express themselves through language. It specifically describes the process of communication in the context of use of a wide range of signs, symbols or semiotics (Bazalgette & Buckingham, 2013). Through multimodality, researchers understand the use of communication media, such as visual, spatial and textual elements to create, convey and receive messages. Therefore, the use of multimedia in social media communication is effectively described on the basis of multimodality. The application of different elements of multimedia in social media communication explains the increasing popularity of Web 2.0 technologies. Multimodality is also applicable in describing how individuals perceive messages in relation to the formats with which they are presented (Zappavigna, 2012). The meaning that is represented by specific communication artifacts is also explained on the basis of multimodality.

Multimodal communication is designed to support computer applications, such as social media tools and technologies. It is becoming popular because it provides for synergy, robustness and efficiency in communication processes. It is however associated with redundancy (Bazalgette & Buckingham, 2013). Multimodality supports teaching in linguistics because it creates opportunities for the application of games and interactive tools to enhance understanding of language structures and their usage in communication. The use of a wide range of communication modalities, including olfactory, visual, tactile, taste and auditory, is the main characteristic of multimodality (Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011). However, the increasing use of social media creates challenges in teaching of linguistics related to the elimination of crucial modalities, such as taste and smell.

Researchers analyze relationships between modalities of communication in order to understand simultaneous linguistic expressions and perceptions of social media users. Nonetheless, there are specific research challenges pertaining to the integration of different modalities into communication processes. For example, researchers need to determine effective strategies of fusing different modalities in human to human communication (Bazalgette & Buckingham, 2013). Possibilities of translating meaning between different modalities also need to be determined through scientific inquiry. Neglect of specific multimodal issues in social media communication is said to have undesired effects in teaching linguistics. Zappavigna (2012) recommends that multimodal communication should be investigated using explanatory and descriptive studies. Such research methods focus on investigating communication processes within natural settings. Since social media communication settings are not natural, challenges in understanding multimodal communication using modern communication technologies are apparent (Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011). However, simulations can be used to investigate how users engage different modalities to enhance technology-driven communication processes.

Social media brings new opportunities for multimodal communication using different media, devices and applications. However, users face the challenge of managing communication contexts, representation of meaning, and improving the quality of presentations (Bazalgette & Buckingham, 2013). Additionally, social media applications provide for the integration of complementary and sequential modalities into the communication process. However, some modalities,

such as time are often contradicting. Zappavigna (2012) indicates the need for introduction of intuitive technologies in the teaching of linguistics to prevent the elimination of important communication modalities from the learning process.

Conversation Analysis

Conversation analysis refers to a model of analyzing spoken communication or interactions for the determination of how language develops within social contexts. It is useful in understanding interactions with classroom settings, courtrooms and in interviews (Sidnell, 2011). Conversation analysis provides a framework for assessing specific aspects of an oral interaction, such as opening and closing, topic management, adjacency pairs, feedback, preference organization, turn-taking and repair. Opening and closing is a crucial element of a conversation as it influences the starting and finishing of oral interactions. Notably, different cultures have divergent approaches to opening and closing conversations. Antaki (2011) illustrates that the place of the conversation also influences the nature of opening and closing statements. For instance, communication across online platforms, including social media networks, have different opening and closing approaches when compared to face-to-face communication. Sidnell (2011) indicates that researchers should demonstrate how the nature of opening and closing of conversations within classrooms is influenced by the use of social media by students and educators.

Adjacent pairs are parts of a conversation that follow each other in sequence. For instance, a person who is presented with the question “Where do you live?” is expected to provide an immediate response related to the question. Delays in response are noticeable and require the addressee to account for not giving an immediate answer. However, immediate responses are not provided in social media conversations. Notably, responses on social media depend on whether or not the addressee is online. Wong & Waring (2010) illustrate that increasing use social media influences the effectiveness of individuals in addressing adjacent pairs and other aspects of conversations (Antaki, 2011). Therefore, teachers should provide students with knowledge on effective use of adjacent pairs in conversations with an understanding of the impact of social media on communication practices of young people.

Topic management is an aspect of conversation analysis that assesses how speakers maintain and change topics. It also involves an analysis of the ability of speakers to effectively deal with changes in a topic. The social cultures of speakers influence the manner in which they manage topics. The adoption of a global culture is facilitated by social media communications. Sidnell (2011) explains that topics of conversation are increasingly influenced by globalization and the use of social media to connect individuals and groups from across the world. Researchers are interested in determining how social media influences the management conversation topics since culture is a crucial component of communication (Wong & Waring, 2010). In the teaching of linguistics, teachers should integrate elements of the globalized culture into lessons on topic management and the use of relevant language to pass across messages within a diverse social environment. Antaki (2011) asserts that students should learn about other cultures so as they can be effective in managing taboo topics and avoiding inappropriate language.

Analysis of turn-taking is an effective approach of determining whether or not a conversation is organized and smooth. An effective conversation provides all participants with opportunities of contributing to discourse. Conversation analysis seeks to establish the need for eliminating possibilities of having overly dominant speakers within conversations (Wong & Waring, 2010). Feedback mechanisms are also analyzed to determine whether conversations provide participants with opportunities of providing responses. It is, however, notable that feedback differs across cultures. Social media platform are designed to provide users with opportunities of providing feedback or expressing their reactions to specific content. However, the language used to provide feedback in social media conversations may not be culturally relevant owing to the divergent cultural values of members of online communities (Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011).

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis is an approach of investigating circumstances of discourse in terms of participants, roles and communication processes. It is also used to assess concepts, values and identities associated with specific discourse (Fairclough, 2013). Through critical analysis, researchers determine the most appropriate way to act, write and talk in line with particular roles of participants

of a discourse. In the context of social media, critical discourse analysis is defined as an investigation into the interaction between individuals and communication agents or technologies (Bloor & Bloor, 2013). The construction of reality within social media communication systems leads to creation of knowledge, which is often shared among individuals. It is the knowledge that is constructed on social media networks that influences relations.

Critical content analysis provides opportunities for assessment of the quantitative and qualitative content of a conversation. However, researchers face the challenge of establishing relationships between the larger sociopolitical frameworks and media content in critical content analysis. Fairclough (2013) asserts that discourse is linked to social interests and power. Therefore, the language used in social media conversations is influenced by the social interests of participants. Conventionally, institutions determine roles and rule of agents of a discourse. The problem with social media conversations is that rules of discourse are established by users. This is depicted by the fact that users of social media networks play the leading role of determining the kind of language they use (Bloor & Bloor, 2013). A regime of truth is often established through the use of appropriate language and conveying meaningful knowledge during conversations. However, a regime of truth is not always established in social media conversations. Users of social media networks often propagate inaccurate information due to the absence of the regime of truth in online discourses (Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011).

Critical discourse analysis has been criticized for lacking a concrete, comprehensive or structured methodology of analyzing conversations. It also fails to consider inter-textual relations. Furthermore, critical discourse analysis does not effectively reproduce ideologies and power relations related to conversations and use of language (Fairclough, 2013). Nonetheless, critical discourse analysis effectively demonstrates how knowledge systems and social relations are developed through effective use of language and proper engagement in conversations. Additionally, critical discourse analysis is time conscious. Therefore, it is effective in analyzing contemporary forms of communications, including social media conversations. It is also effective in analyzing both rhetoric and language that are expressed in conversations (Bloor & Bloor, 2013). Critical content analysis is relevant to the teaching of linguistics as it indicates effective use of rhetoric and language to establish meaningful conversations.

Corpus Linguistics

Corpus linguistics is a methodology of studying and learning linguistics on the basis of a body of natural language. It is reliable as it is informed by empirical or attested data. Corpus linguistics also provides a framework for objective analysis of linguistics (McEnery & Hardie, 2011). It also introduces both practical and theoretical issues into linguistic studies. Researchers apply corpus linguistics to test hypotheses and existing theories in linguistic studies. It also enables for the establishment of textual evidence for learning and analyzing linguistics. A well designed corpus is beneficial in teaching linguistics because it is reliable. Notably, a corpus integrates linguistic intuitions of experts in language (Gries, 2010). Therefore, biases in the learning and understanding of language are eliminated through the application of corpus linguistics.

Corpus data is useful in linguistic analysis because it is natural and contextualized. This means that corpus linguistics is appropriate for analysis of conversations in real life contexts. Naturally occurring language is commonly used by users within social media platforms. For example, users of Twitter engage in effective dyadic interactions in real time (McEnery & Hardie, 2011). However, new challenges related to the robustness of naturally occurring language in social media conversations are experienced. Through corpus linguistics, the authenticity of the language used in social media conversations can be analyzed. For example, the manner in which behavior of participants is expressed through language can be determined by using corpus linguistics to analyze online conversations (Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011).

Corpus linguistics minimizes dependence of anecdotes and introspection in analysis of language. This makes it an objective method of determining the nature of conversations across social media networks. Additionally, corpus linguistics is applied in assessing language patterns regardless of the format used to communicate ideas. Gries (2010) demonstrates that corpus linguistics provides tools for high-speed learning or teaching of language. McEnery and Hardie (2011) explain that the efficiency of learning in linguistics depends on the teaching methods teachers adopt and implement.

Corpus linguistics enhances learning of language because it provides students with high quality samples on language usage (Wong & Waring, 2010). It also enables teachers to act as facilitators of research in linguistics. Students who apply

corpus linguistics also have access to authentic knowledge on language structures. However, students do not realize immediate results when corpus linguistics is the main method of instruction. In addition, corpus linguistics is associated with language endangerment. Gries (2010) explains that reliance of spoken corpora in teaching language poses the risk of incorporating informal usage of language, such as UGC in social media communications. Challenges related to corpus linguistics have specific implications to researchers. For example, researchers need to determine how changes in language usage in social media communications impact teaching linguistics on the basis of corpus linguistics methodology.

System Functional Linguistics

System functional linguistics refers to the method of interpreting and constructing meaning through the use of language structures. It was designed to ensure that communication processes address contextual, social and cultural contexts (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013). System functional linguistics is relevant to social media communications as it views the usage of language as a means of achieving social interests. On the basis of system functional linguistics, effective communication is termed as that which is embedded in cultural values and relevant social contexts (Coffin & Donohue, 2012). In teaching language, system functional linguistics is used to define the roles of teachers and students in learning processes. Students are able to learn that different communication situations should be aligned with appropriate cultural contexts in the usage of language.

System functional linguistics is useful in teaching language as it considers both the written and oral channels of conveying information (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013). Therefore, teachers are able to align teaching strategies with the expectations of learners. It is notable that social media platforms provide users with opportunities of using a wide range of formats or multimedia. Therefore, students expect teaching of language to be aligned with their needs for diverse communication channels and formats. Coffin and Donohue (2012) recommend that teachers should enable language learners to analyze textual and visual elements or language so as they can attain a comprehensive understanding of different social and cultural contexts that require proper usage of language.

Conclusion

The current research demonstrates that social media has had a significant impact on the usage of formal language, especially among young people. Therefore, educators need to align their teaching methods with the changing styles of communication. Researchers should address challenges related to the application of various methods of analyzing language in order to provide reliable evidence for incorporation into classrooms. Both educators and researchers need to ensure that emerging linguistic styles are effectively accommodated into communication processes. As new elements of language usage emerge from the increased use of social media, researchers should ensure that current theories in linguistics are also updated. That is to say, communication behaviors and the use of language should be restructured to accommodate the needs of users of social media networks.

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